

# CLIMATE JUSTICE AND A FAIR TRANSITION PERSPECTIVES FOR AND FROM COMMUNITIES IN “DEVELOPING” COUNTRIES

**Future trends and structural limitations, a call to action from rural communities in Bolivia.**

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## **Introduction:**

This document is a contribution to understanding Climate Justice, drawing on Plataforma Boliviana Frente al Cambio Climático's experience working for the past ten years with local communities and social organizations who are on the front lines bearing the brunt of climate change and extractivism, which has resulted in worsening living conditions, the violation of their rights, and weakened the structure of their civic organizations.

## THE CLIMATE JUSTICE APPROACH

Climate Justice is an approach that highlights the complex relationships between the multiple structural causes of Climate Change, whose combined consequences are borne disproportionately by communities that include the world's poorest, most systematically exploited, and historically disadvantaged.

Climate Justice is an evolving concept that allows for a much deeper analysis of the scale of the problem posed by climate change, and opens the possibility of confronting the issue more effectively. Climate Justice incorporates, among others, concepts of environmental justice, social justice, and economic justice.

Crucially, the Climate Justice perspective recognizes that the current climate crisis is an ultimate expression of the failures of an economic and political system that is fundamentally unjust, which through the unlimited consumption of natural resources and the exploitation of people results in the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority. This perspective holds that climate change is a reflection of a civilizational crisis, in which elites and corporations working through governments and international institutions have achieved a status quo in which economic growth is conceived of as the only way to achieve “development,” therefore driving aggressive extractivism, accelerated industrialization and oppressive commercialism that is pushing the planet towards uninhabitability and the great majority of humanity into misery.

## THE SCIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change, as science has demonstrated, is the greatest threat to the survival of life on earth as we know it. Following the current trajectory for emission of greenhouse gasses, scientists predict that in the coming decades we will reach a point of no return, in which the planet's temperature regulating systems will be thrown permanently off balance by escalating feedback effects, pushing us into a scenario of exponential climate change. Some scientists warn that as much as one third of the planet -- particularly regions near the equator -- will be uninhabitable by the end of the century -- regions where today live some of the most vulnerable populations who are the least responsible for greenhouse gas emissions.

The previous IPCC special report on global warming at a level of 1.5 degrees Celsius -- despite being widely criticized as conservative and overly cautious in raising the alarm about our planet-wide emergency -- concluded that stabilizing global temperatures below the 1.5 degree threshold will require that we “reduce net anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) by 2030 relative to 2010 levels, and continue reducing emissions in order to achieve “net zero” by approximately 2050, and achieving this will require changes that are “rapid and large scale” in land, energy, housing, transport, and urban infrastructure.

On the other hand, that same report indicates that in order to have a 66% chance of avoiding the 1.5 degree threshold, humanity could emit no more than 420 Gt/Co<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere. Every year emissions have increased, and in the year 2016 alone there were 53.4 Gt/Co<sub>2</sub> of emissions. Under the current rhythm of emissions growth, we will have consumed the entirety of our remaining emissions allowance by the year 2026.

Therefore, many scientists and analysis believe that it is already too late for humanity to avoid crossing “the point of no return,” and that the IPCC report actually underestimates the phenomenon of climate change, noting that certain of the planet’s geophysical systems are already reaching their limits, which could give way to a domino-effect of environmental collapse.

The IPCC report itself acknowledges that the models used to produce its estimates don’t account fully for certain positive feedback effects in disrupting the thermal regulation of the planet, such as the loss of the Albedo effect, the collapse of marine ecosystems, the release of methane gas from frozen boreal tundras as they thaw, on top of which there is uncertainty as to how the planet will react to emissions, creating a margin of error of +/- 400 Gt/Co<sub>2</sub> -- which is to say it’s highly possible that we will pass the limits before predicted and have even less of a margin for action. All the while, many analysts who support the UN’s recommendations promote false solutions such as “market mechanisms” or the use of dangerous technologies like geoengineering or nuclear energy.

Unfortunately, the trends in emissions continue on their course towards the worst case scenario predicted by science. Concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere have already reached 410.78 ppm, and the rise in annual overall temperatures has reached 0.8 degrees, surpassing limits never before seen in human history.

## IMPACTS

The rise in global temperatures, extreme climate events -- which are like evolution in that they may be characterized by slow change but are nevertheless prone to sudden increases in frequency and intensity -- topped off by the overconsumption of resources and pollution, is now materializing in the rapid loss of biodiversity and degradation of ecosystems, the decline in availability, quantity, and quality of freshwater sources, and a decline in food production systems.

The increase in disasters brought about by extreme climate events has dire implications for our infrastructure, basic services, systems of production and the economy. Moreover, the rise in global

temperatures is causing changes in agricultural cycles and the spread of pests and diseases into environments where they previously never existed, leaving local populations with no time to adapt.

The fulfillment of human rights such as the right to water, the right to water, to a healthy environment, health, along with other social, economic and cultural rights, the rights of indigenous communities, the rights of women and children, the rights of Mother Earth and of future generations are all increasingly placed at risk by the effects of climate change.

The adverse conditions created by climate change for people struggling to maintain a basic dignified standard of living, combined with economic recession and the failure of governments to create effective and inclusive public policies, is already resulting in severe social consequences. Today, climate change is becoming a principal driver of rural to urban migration, where most migrants encounter conditions of greater social inequality and exploitation.

Some analysis argue that climate change could have a major destabilizing effect on our societies and political systems, pointing out that for example the conflict in Syria and the wave of migrants fleeing Honduras were sparked in part by the social tensions resulting from severe prolonged droughts. It is not a coincidence that many developed countries see climate change as a national security issue.

The global reaction to this systemic crisis has been to elect conservative and nationalist populist leaders who continue to double down on the pursuit of economic growth and global trade. “Financial adjustment” policies, along with the retraction of social security and the flexibilization of the labor force combine nationalist protectionism to feed xenophobia and draconian migration policies. In either case, the world’s democratic systems are deteriorating while authoritarian regimes are on the rise.

## COMBINED AND UNEVEN IMPACTS

We cannot talk about the effects of climate change without also addressing other forces that impact poor communities, worsening their living conditions and increasing their vulnerability to climate change.

Development policies that are geared toward economic growth, by encouraging private investment in extractive activities and industrialization, directly affect ecosystems and the environment with rising pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.

Among the policies that seek to ensure the profitability of these investments are: subsidies for production, tax waivers, environmental deregulation, the flexibilization of labor, disregard for the rights of indigenous communities to free and informed consultation, the criminalization of protest including through co-opting social movements into the government itself. The acquisition of foreign loans, which always are attached to certain conditions like promotion of direct foreign investment, are among the motivations behind these policies.

These policies, far from being economically or environmentally sustainable or socially just, far from reducing poverty, consolidate the power of elites and corporations, increase the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, consolidate colonial power relations, further entrench bureaucracy and corruption --

but most importantly, they exacerbate the vulnerability to climate change for precisely those communities that are the first to suffer from these structural inequalities.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

Certain actors bear historical responsibility for anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, mostly produced from the extraction and consumption of fossil fuels. Big oil, energy, and industrial corporations, supported by the governments of developed countries, have reaped enormous profits through establishing colonial relationships in order to extract oil, gas and coal. This has facilitated the concentration of colossal wealth in the hands of those who own the means of production and ensured a certain standard of living in these countries. In contrast, developing countries have accrued high levels of poverty, lack basic services, and are treated as passive open terrain for the extraction of primary resources.

Accountability for historically accumulated emissions is important because, once emitted, Co<sub>2</sub> stays in the atmosphere for centuries, making this is a very important issue to grapple with in these negotiations. By country, total global emissions have been produced by: USA - 28.8%, China - 9.0%, Russia - 8.0%, Germany - 8.69%, UK - 5.8%, Japan - 3.87%, France - 2.77%, India - 2.44%, Canada - 2.22% and Ukraine - 2.2%.

On the other hand, looking at emissions levels for the year 2011 shows another trend, because it takes land use into account; when deforestation is considered, the figure changes considerably: China - 16.4%, USA - 15.7%, Brasil - 6.5%, Indonesia - 4.6%, Russia - 4.6%, India - 4.2% Japan - 3.1%, Germany - 2.3%, Canada - 1.8%, Mexico - 1.6%. It is important to point out that the top ten polluters produce more than 60% of all global emissions.

If we compare per capita emissions, the number varies according to the size of each country's population and their consumption of fossil fuels. For the year 2009, the countries with the greatest emissions in metric tons of carbon dioxide per capita were: Gibraltar - 151.96, Virgin Islands, U.S. - 113.71, Qatar - 79.82, Netherlands Antilles - 51.26, Bahrain - 42.68, United Arab Emirates - 40.31, Trinidad and Tobago - 38.88, Singapore - 34.59, Kuwait - 31.52, Montserrat - 28.73, Nauru - 21.96.

However, an even more revealing perspective is offered by the 2017 Carbon Mayor Report, which determined the 51% of all global emissions can be traced to 25 corporations and state fossil fuel agencies, and that a mere 100 such entities are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

Finally, a report by OXFAM further illuminates the structural injustices at play, demonstrating that the wealthiest 10% of the earth's population produces 49% of Co<sub>2</sub> emissions while the poorest 50% of the world's population produces only 10% of Co<sub>2</sub> emissions. Though it's true that the largest proportion of the world's poor live in developing countries, these extreme levels of inequality are also becoming exacerbated in developed countries.

## THE LIMITS OF STATES AND MULTILATERAL AGREEMENTS

Multilateral efforts like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change attempting to achieve a real agreement that would stabilize global temperatures at a rise of no more than 1.5 degree C and avoid catastrophic and irreversible change are on the verge of failure, principally because these negotiations fail to tackle the structural causes of the problem, nor do they aim to limit the activities of corporations responsible for emissions, nor do they provide mechanisms to ensure that 80% of proven fossil fuel reserves remain in the ground, or how to provide for a fair transition towards non-fossil fuel based energy sources for the communities that are most affected. On the contrary, these negotiations have become a setting in which to promote the same logic that has destroyed the world. Discussions at the negotiations alternate between opening new opportunities for investment, and promoting false solutions like carbon markets, climate-smart agriculture, or geoengineering, or proposing new mechanisms of international debt to finance adaptation efforts or recover from the damage caused by extreme climate events.

In the past ten years of negotiations, there has been a systematic retreat in the the language and principles of the convention that weakens the global climate regime. Every year it becomes more difficult to maintain recognition of our shared but uneven responsibilities, and the agreements have devolved into a weak system of voluntary commitments which are not subject to the recommendations of science or any kind of oversight, allowing countries to excuse themselves from taking action, or make minimal efforts, or even simply disguise their ongoing support for polluting industries.

In contrast, what is needed to avoid a climate collapse scenario is so radical that it would involve a high degree of economic risk and directly affect the profits of corporations and private businesses that operate across the world. In their geopolitical negotiation strategies, governments never risk their own economic growth. On the contrary, policies that shore up the privileges of elites and corporations already determine what position states will take, before they ever sit down at the negotiating table, where corporations operate through their avatars in governments and other organizations.

Under these inauspicious conditions, it is difficult if not impossible to hope that these negotiations hold any hope to help us avoid a climate crisis or promote a fair transition for the most vulnerable communities and populations.

Figure 1: Climate Justice Approach



## FAIR TRANSITION

Taking into account the urgency, historical responsibilities, role of corporations, development policies, limits of international negotiations, developmentalist agenda of national governments, and the enormous threat stalking the poor and vulnerable populations of the world, our concern for a fair transition cannot simply stop at demanding recognition for the historic debt of developed countries, but must demand that the provision of financial resources, technology transfers, and capacity building be included in the framework of the UNFCCC.

The report “After Paris, Inequality, Fair Shares and the Climate Emergency,” highlights that, in order to achieve a fair and effective transition away from energy systems dependent on fossil fuels in the context of global poverty, special attention must be paid not only to inequality between countries but also to inequality within countries, between the rich few and the poor majority, if we want to keep global temperatures from rising over the 1.5 degree C threshold. In this vein, the report also points out that the wealthy (individuals as well as companies) in every country should take bold actions in order to reduce their own emissions and support a global transition. Furthermore, “the global elites must not pass responsibility off onto the poorest and most vulnerable.”

However, the idea of a fair transition does not mean that “developing countries have the right to continue increasing their emissions under the pretext of eliminating poverty and the right to development.” Developing countries, while demanding reparations for the historical debt that is owed them, cannot put off immediately starting the process of profound and gradual transformation that will in the medium term overhaul their economies, energy systems, and systems of production.

The reality is that the world will likely face the worst case scenario with regard to climate change, and it is highly possible that the collapse of the planet's regulatory mechanisms will come to pass sooner than

predicted, that communities will have to face the worst impacts imaginable, and that no real political will exists amongst the governments of the world to make the necessary changes to avoid catastrophe. In this bleak scenario, we must urgently reduce other compounding factors that contribute to the vulnerability of populations within countries -- restrain extractive industries, fight against the power of elites and corporations, eliminate social inequality, achieve the liberation of our economies from the world market, improve the health of our democracies, demand respect for the rights of communities, and change the orientation of development policy. This is the most urgent, necessary, and possibly effective strategy that we can take in response to the crisis that approaches.

Although for now we must try to stop attempts to propagate false solutions in these negotiations, we cannot afford to wait for the UNFCCC discussions to achieve a fair transition; we must go out and make our vision of a fair transition on the streets, in the neighborhoods, organizations, and communities, confronting the power of elites and corporations, defending communities and denouncing the abuse of rights, the imposition of extractivist projects, and damage to our Mother Earth.

**CLIMATE JUSTICE NOW!**

**CHANGE THE SYSTEM, NOT THE CLIMATE!**